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Influence Of Identity, Congruence Of Interest And Coping Strategy On Decision Making

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Abstract

Construction of identity and mechanisms with which it reaches vocational maturity lead adolescents to explore their interests and to make adequate choice. The objective of the contribution is to value the role of identity, congruence of interests and coping strategies as predictive variables to decision making. The research involved 350 students, attending the 4th and the 5th year of senior secondary schools. They completed Ego Identity Process Questionnaire, Self-Directed Search, General Decision Making Style and Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced. Results indicate that the profile of interests is higher in adolescents with Achievement identity; a positive correlation between identity-moratorium status, intuitive decision making style and dependent coping strategy is noticed. Suggestions are being presented for future research.

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1. Introduction

The word adolescence is coined from the Latin verb ‘adolescere’ that implies “to grow into maturity”. The adolescence is a period of rapid growth; it is a process of achieving the attitude and beliefs needed for effective participation in a society (Oluhunle, 2007). Adolescence is a distinct period with unique opportunities for the development of health, competence and capacity, and not merely a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood. Adolescence is a crucial stage – in a theatrical sense – where new and risky contexts require the individual to decide about his or her own future and to face the consequences of his or her choices (Shlafer et al., 2013).

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Research data show that the capacity to plan a first professional pathway is correlated with identity development, with self-effectiveness in defining interests, with seeking useful information for undertaking a career and constructing realistic plans for career advancement (Vuori, Koivisto, Mutanen, Jokisaari, & Salamela-Aro, 2008). In particular, in her work on child development, Laura Berk (2006) discusses about the importance of identity in the decision-making process and highlights James Marcia's theory of identity development based on self exploration and commitment. Marcia's model (1980) defines the identity as a dynamic structure and not a static one, whose formation depends on different factors like the decisions taken during life. The author works out the conception of *identity statuses*, which represent the styles through which to face identity problems, delineating two of their key components: the commitment with which adolescents make choices on material issues, and exploration of alternatives in relation to objectives, beliefs and convictions (Pellerone, 2013; Schimmenti, Pellerone, Pace, & Nigito, 2011; Wigfield & Wagner, 2005). The author, jointly analyzing the two dimensions, identifies four identity statuses that correspond to as many modalities for facing events: to) *Achievement* (high exploration, high commitment), b) *Moratorium* (high exploration, low commitment), c) *Foreclosure* (low exploration, high commitment), d) *Diffusion* (low exploration, low commitment). In detail identity diffusion is typical of those who effect superficial experimentations, without reflections and therefore not aiming at a future commitment; during this status, adolescents don't show interest in occupational or ideological choices. Foreclosure status is typical of those adolescents that cling uncritically to the first identificatory models without experimenting with alternative ones; the adolescent accepts what other ones have chosen for him or her. Identity moratorium is a marginal period where the adolescent is on the verge of an identity crisis; however, the adolescent has not made any commitments yet. In the achievement status the adolescent makes an identity choice after investigating the possible alternatives through experimentation (Pellerone, 2013). The literature shows that adolescents with an identity not stable and not diversified show difficulty in making vocational choices coherent with their personal characteristics and those of the labour market (Pellerone, 2011; Wigfield & Wagner, 2005). By contrast, adolescents with a high degree of coherence and differentiation of identity show decisional capacity, and appropriate educational and social behaviours. In particular, subjects with a status of Achievement manifest a high level of decisional self-effectiveness and differentiation of interests, and those in Moratorium and Foreclosure status show a low level of self-effectiveness in choices and diversification of professional preferences (Gushue, Scanlan, Pantzer, & Clarke, 2006; Nauta & Kahn, 2007). In the identity diffusion stage, students are unmotivated to even begin the exploration process.; they may be overwhelmed by the sheer number of career choices, resulting in having no idea on where to start. Likewise, adolescents with decisional self-effectiveness also have a clearer vision of their own interests, objectives and competences (Hirschi, 2009). Moreover, the diversification of interests appears to be positively correlated with a good level of satisfaction, productivity and school adaptation, identity development, coping strategy, and capacity for choice of a more stable career in time (Allen & Robbins, 2010; Tracey, 2007); infact the quality and quantity of learning in school age requires optimum efficiency of cognitive functions, such as perception, memory, information processing abilities and coping strategy (Pellerone, 2013). To confirm this, Robitschek and Cook (1999) study the relationship between personal characteristics and vocational identity in a group of college students, pointing out that personal growth initiative predicts environmental exploration and vocational identity; coping style predicts self-exploration. Radford, Mann, Ohta and Nakane (1998) examining decision coping styles in a group of Japanese and Australian university students, disclose that for both cultural groups the decisional process is positively correlated with the "choice" of decision making style, but is negatively correlated with decisional stress and the "complacency," "avoidance," and "hypervigilance" coping styles. Similarly, a recent research about Italian students shows that subjects who use the avoidant decision making style resort to avoidance coping strategies, but they haven't the tendency to use problem solving strategies. The avoidant and dependent decision making styles are predictive variables to the avoidance coping strategies; the level of self exploration is a predictive dimension to coping strategies oriented to problem solving (Pellerone, In press). In the light of these premises, the objective of the contribution is to evaluate the role of identity, congruence of interests and coping strategies as predictive variables to decision making process in a group of Italian adolescences.

2. Objectives and research hypothesis

The aim is to investigate how adolescents, classified into the four identity statuses (according to Marcia's Model), differ in interests profile; in agreement with the literature (Hirschi, 2009; Nauta & Kahn, 2007), it's expected that adolescents with a high-profile identity status present a greater level of differentiation, coherence and stability of vocational preferences compared to low profile students. A further objective is to study the relationship between identity status, decisional styles (classified according to the Model of Scott and Bruce) and coping strategy, hypothesizing that adolescents with a low-profile status tend to use a dependent coping strategy and to search for advice and opinions from people that are considered competent, in agreement with the literature (Luyckx, Schwartz, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Goossens, 2009; Pellerone, In press).

3. Subjects and procedure

The research involved 350 students (175 boys and 175 girls), attending the 4th year (age $M = 16.97$; $S.D = 0.16$) and the 5th year (age $M = 18.21$; $S.D = 0.41$) of senior secondary schools. The sample completed Ego Identity Process Questionnaire, Self-Directed Search, General Decision Making Style and Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced. Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (EIPQ) is a tool by Balistreri, Busch-Rossnagel and Geisinger (1995), serving to investigate identity status development according to Marcia's Model. It is a scale constituted by 32 items that investigate the dimensions of exploration (through four ideological domains that is occupation, religion, politics and values) and commitment (four interpersonal domains, that is family, friendships, gender roles and capacity to enter into sentimental relationships). The dimension of interests was investigated according to Holland's hexagonal model through the administration of the Self-Directed Search (SDS) by Polacek (2001), which classifies professions into six types: Realistic, Intellectual, Artistic, Social, Enterprising and Conventional. The General Decision Making Style (Scott & Bruce, 1995), constructed for detecting individual decisional style, is a questionnaire consisting of 25 items grouped in five subscales corresponding to five decisional styles: Rational, Intuitive, Dependent, Avoiding and Spontaneous. Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced (COPE-NVI) formed by 60 item, grouped into five large essentially independent dimensions: a) Social support, b) Avoidance strategies, c) Positive attitude, d) Problem solving and e) Turning to religion. The Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced - New Italian Version (Sica, Magni, Ghisi, Altoè, Sighinolfi, Rocco, & Franceschini, 1997a) represents an improvement of the previous Italian version of the COPE, a measure originally developed in the United States.

4. Data analysis

In order to investigate how adolescents differ in interests profile, an Analysis of Univariate Variance was carried out; to evaluate the relation between identity status, decision making style and coping strategy, Correlation Analyses were carried out. Linear multiple regression analysis was used to study predictive variables of decision making process.

5. Results

On the basis of *identity development*, the following emerges: 27.10% of the students are going through the Blockage identity status, followed by 26.90% with a Diffusion status and 24.60% with a Moratorium status; there are no significant differences due either to the gender variable with $X^2 (3, N = 350) = 3.40, p = .33$ or to age with $X^2 (3, N = 350) = 7.29, p = .061$. The Univariate Variance analysis shows the influence of gender on the use of dependent decision making style ($F(1,348) = 7.11; p < .05$); analysis of the mean scores indicates that girls ($M = 3.06$; $S.D = .75$) uses more the dependent style than boys ($M = 2.85$; $S.D = .73$). The type 2 factorial MANOVA (Gender) $X 2$ to verify the influence of gender and age on interest profile emphasises the main effect of age on congruence of interests ($F(3,342) = 2.89; p < .05$): in particular older adolescences seem to have more coherence than younger ones. The same data analysis to verify the influence of gender and age on coping strategies shows the effect of gender, the breakdown of the univariate effects shows differences in the dimension of positive attitude ($F(1,342) = 3.90; p < .05$), and turning to religion ($F(1,342) = 3.90; p < .05$): in detail man present higher average scores than woman. As regards age variable the breakdown of the univariate effects shows differences in the dimension of social support ($F(3,342) = 6.71; p < .01$), and problem solving ($F(3,342) = 3.55; p < .05$), in particular younger students are more

influenced by social context than older ones, who have higher capacity of problem solving.

The first aim is to investigate how adolescents differ in levels of differentiation, congruence, stability of interests. The one-way Anova shows that achievement status seem to influence the level of differentiation of interests ($F=4.20$; $p<.05$): the profile of interests is higher in adolescents with Achievement identity, so the first research hypothesis appears to be partially confirmed. A further objective is to investigate the relationship between Identity Status, decisional styles and coping strategy; the Pearson's correlation suggests a positive relation between rational decision making style and the tendency to use problem solving as coping strategy ($r=.22$; $p<.01$). In reference to self exploration (measured through the analysis of four ideological domains, that is occupation, religion, politics and values), the Pearson's correlation points out the presence of negatively correlation between avoidance coping strategy and values ($r = -.13$; $p<.05$); in reference to self commitment (investigated through four interpersonal domains, or family, friendships, gender roles and capacity to enter into sentimental relationships) the research shows as avoidance coping is negatively correlated to friendships ($r=-.15$; $p<.01$), problem solving strategy is positively related to friendship ($r=.11$; $p<.05$). The same analysis shows that adolescences in moratorium status use an dependent decision making style ($r=.11$; $p<.05$), foreclosure adolescences favour an avoidant modality choice ($r =.17$; $p<.001$) and dependent style ($r=.12$; $p<.05$), in agreement with the research hypothesis and the literature (Luyckx *et al.*, 2009; Pellerone, 2012). At the last, linear multiple regression analysis notices that low level of social support and the problem solving attitude are predictive variables of rational decision making style (30% total variance explained).

6. Conclusion

The results of the research show that, for classification of identity statuses, a higher percentage of adolescents goes through the status of Foreclosure, followed by those in Diffusion and Moratorium; these data confirm that, consistently with the average age of the group, most adolescents still cling uncritically to the first identificatory models without experimenting with possible alternatives; others make superficial explorations not oriented towards a choice and a future commitment. The analysis of decisional styles shows that girls have a greater propensity to make choices linked to other people's advice and suggestions, a datum in agreement with the literature Gati, Landman, Davidovitch, Asulin-Peretz, & Gadassi, 2010). It appears interesting to notice that younger students (using coping strategy) are more influenced by social context than older ones, who have higher capacity of problem solving. The latter datum confirms the traditional theories on development, which maintain that there is progressive evolution of the modalities of coping, from a dependent strategy to more logical and rational coping modality. In reference to gender variable, the research shows that boys tend more to use the spiritual coping strategy than girls; this finding is in contrast with the literature that indicates that religious coping is utilized the same way by both genders. In fact, religion is found to be the most prominent coping strategy employed by both males and females, with females more frequently reporting religion as a mean to manage stressful situations (Dakhli, Dinkha, Matta & Aboul Hosn, 2013). Consistent with the literature the boys tend to have a greater positive attitude to coping, infact females also tend to use humor less than males as a coping mechanism.

The degree of coherence of interests is influenced by age: the youngest people show a low level of congruence in comparison to the older ones; this datum seems to show that young adolescents manifest greater confusion and incoherence among professional interests. In the light of these results it is necessary to stress the importance of the coherence of interests expressed, for the purpose of planning a process of vocational counselling making the choice process effective and efficient. Indeed, it has been shown that a high coherence of interests is indicative of a good level of identity exploration, as differentiation of interests is indicative of the level of identity commitment (Pellerone, 2010). Furthermore, on the basis of the interests manifested by adolescents it is possible to boost their effectiveness convictions; in this way, increasing the range of their self-effectiveness convictions and their interests, also their possibilities of choice increase in actual fact.

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